

DUAL POWER SENSING SCHEME FOR A MEMORY DEVICE

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

[0001] The present invention generally relates to integrated circuit devices and, more particularly, to memory devices that involve sensing operations, such as dynamic random access memory (DRAM) devices.

Description of the Related Art

[0002] The evolution of sub-micron CMOS technology has resulted in an increasing demand for dynamic random access memory (DRAM) devices. A DRAM device is generally a volatile memory device where each memory cell consists of one transistor and one capacitor. Such memory cells require periodic refreshing to protect the data stored in a memory cell from corruption or decaying over time. Refreshing is performed periodically (e.g., about every 64 msec), as well as when an information content of the memory cell is accessed, for example, during a read or write operation. Common to such routines is a sensing operation, during which a content of the memory cell is asserted and refreshed.

[0003] Therefore, the sensing operation is one of most power-consuming operations performed in the DRAM devices. In battery-powered computer systems (e.g., palm-top computers, hand-held electronic devices, and the like), minimization of power consumption is critically important. In advanced DRAM devices, during the sensing operation, about a half of the power that is used to refresh an array of the memory cells may partially be recycled for sensing memory cells in the other array. However, there are limitations to such recycling schemes, as described below in reference to FIGS. 1-3.

[0004] FIG. 1A depicts a block diagram of an exemplary DRAM device 100. The DRAM device 100 generally comprises control circuitry 102 and a memory circuitry 104. The control circuitry 102 generally includes a logic circuit 105 including various control circuitry such as command and address decoders, self refresh circuitry, and the like, as well as a sensing circuit 106. The sensing circuit 106 includes circuitry utilized

to generate voltage signals used to access (e.g., sense) data stored in various memory cell arrays 138.

[0005] Each memory cell array 138 may have a corresponding array of bit line sense amplifiers (BLSAs) 140, collectively forming a memory block 136. In devices implementing BLSA power line charge recycling, BLSA arrays are divided into an “upper” group of BLSA arrays 140_U and a “lower” group of BLSA arrays 140_L. As used herein, the term recycling generally refers to the utilization of charges supplied by the external power source 110 to the upper group 140_U in sensing operations involving the lower group 140_L. The power lines of the upper and lower groups are supplied with the voltage signals generated by the sensing circuit 106, via a BLSA power bus 116.

[0006] As illustrated in FIG. 1B, the upper and lower BLSA groups 140 each utilize two power lines (208 and 210) for sensing bit line pairs 202 of memory cells 200 of a corresponding array 138 (VH_BLSA1/VL_BLSA1 and VH_BLSA2/VL_BLSA2, respectively). Recycling typically occurs by transferring charge from the lower voltage line of the upper group (VL_BLSA1) to the higher voltage line of the lower group (VH_BLSA2). The concepts of charge recycling may be best described with reference to FIG. 2, which illustrates a conventional sensing circuit 106₂.

[0007] As illustrated in FIG. 2, a bit line sensing controller 134₂ may generate a set of signals Φ_{PRE_CHARGE} and Φ_{ACTIVE} to control the application of voltage signals applied to power lines of the upper and lower group BLSA arrays 140, via a switch array 132₂. The upper group 140_U utilizes an upper reference voltage V_{INT} and an intermediate voltage V_{INT_M} to power the sensing operations, while the lower group 140_L utilizes V_{INT_M} and a lower reference voltage (e.g., GND in FIG. 2) to power the sensing operations. The voltage signals V_{INT} , V_{INT_M} (approx $V_{INT}/2$) and GND are generated by a voltage regulator 130₂. FIG. 3 illustrates an exemplary timing diagram of the Φ_{PRE_CHARGE} and Φ_{ACTIVE} signals for sensing operations performed by sensing circuit 106₂.

[0008] As illustrated in FIG. 3, at a time T1, prior to sensing, the power lines of each group of BLSA arrays 140 have been precharged (e.g., by equalizing each corresponding pair of power lines via switches 222_{PC} while the bit line sensing controller 134₂ drives Φ_{PRE_CHARGE} high). As illustrated, VH_BLSA1 and VL_BLSA1 are

precharged to a first level VPCG1, while VH_BLSA2 and VL_BLSA2 have been precharged to VPCG2. Sensing operations begin at a time T2, when the sensing controller 134₂ asserts Φ_{ACTIVE} , causing switches 222U and 222L to close, coupling VH_BLSA1 to V_{INT} and VL_BLSA2 to GND. As a result, VH_BLSA1 increases to V_{INT}, while VL_BLSA2 decreases to GND.

[0009] At the beginning of the sensing operations, the power lines VL_BLSA1 and VH_BLSA2 are also coupled together, causing charge to be transferred from VL_BLSA1 to VH_BLSA2, as VL_BLSA1 decreases from VPCG1 to V_{INT_M} causing a corresponding increase in VH_BLSA2 from VPCG2 to V_{INT_M} (this increase is denoted in FIG. 3 as V_{REC}). Thus, current consumption from the external power source 110 is reduced, as charge used to precharge the upper group 140U is utilized in the sensing operations involving the lower group. At a time T3, the bit line sensing controller 134₂ de-asserts Φ_{ACTIVE} , signaling an end of the sensing operations, and decoupling the power lines from the internal power supply 130₂. At a time T4, the power lines are again precharged, in preparation of the next sensing operation, by equalizing the power lines via switches 222_{PC}.

[0010] Thus, during the sensing operation, the conventional sensing circuit 106₂ may recycle approximately 50% of the power (or charge) used in the upper group for sensing by the lower group. To provide such recycling of the charge, the level of V_{INT_M} should be less than half the output voltage V_{EXT} of the external power source 110. Additionally, of course, the voltage differential between the power lines of the BLSA arrays 140 must be sufficient to maintain full voltage logic levels on the sensed bit lines (which is based on switching transistor threshold voltages for particular device technologies). As external voltage levels continue to shrink, satisfying these requirements of V_{INT_M} may become more difficult.

[0011] Therefore, there is a need in the art for an improved sensing circuit configuration for use in memory devices, such as dynamic random access memory (DRAM) devices.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0012] Embodiments of the present invention provide methods and circuit configurations for recycling charge from one array of bit line sense amplifiers for use in

sensing operations involving a second array of bit line sense amplifiers.

[0013] One embodiment provides a method for recycling a charge in a memory device. The method generally includes precharging first and second power lines of a first array of bit line sense amplifiers to a first voltage level between an upper reference voltage level and a first intermediate voltage level, precharging first and second power lines of a second array of bit line sense amplifiers to a second voltage level between a second intermediate voltage level and a lower voltage reference, wherein the second intermediate voltage level is greater than the first intermediate voltage level, and momentarily coupling the first power line of the second array to the second power line of the first array to transfer charge therefrom.

[0014] Another embodiment provides a method for recycling charge. The method generally includes powering at least a portion of sensing operations of a first array of bit line sense operations with first and second power lines at an upper reference voltage level and a first intermediate voltage level, respectively, powering at least a portion of sensing operations of a second array of bit line sense operations with first and second power lines at a second intermediate voltage level and a lower reference voltage level, respectively, and during or prior to the sensing operations, transferring charge from the second power line of the first array to the first power line of the second array.

[0015] Another embodiment provides a method for recycling charge from one or more power lines of a first array of bit line sense amplifiers to one or more power lines of a second array of bit line sense amplifiers. The method generally includes momentarily closing a first one or more switches to precharge first and second power lines of the first array to a first voltage level between a first intermediate voltage level and an upper reference voltage level and to precharge first and second power lines of the second array to a second voltage level between a lower reference voltage level and a second intermediate voltage level, momentarily closing a second one or more switches to transfer charge from the second power line of the first array to the first power line of the second array, and momentarily closing a third one or more switches to couple the first power line of the second array to a power supply node at the second intermediate voltage level.

[0016] Another embodiment provides a circuit configuration for use in recycling bit line charges. The circuit configuration generally includes a first set of switches to selectively couple a first power line of a first array of bit line sense amplifiers to a power supply node at an upper reference voltage level and to selectively couple a second power line of a second array of bit line sense amplifiers to a power supply node at a lower reference voltage level, a second set of switches to selectively couple a second power line of the first array to a power supply node at a first intermediate voltage level and to selectively couple a first power line of the second array to a power supply node at a second intermediate voltage level higher than the first intermediate voltage level, a third set of switches to selectively precharge the first and second power lines of the first array to a first precharge voltage level and to selectively precharge the first and second power lines of the second array to a second precharge voltage level, and a fourth set of one or more switches to selectively couple the second power line of the first array to the first power line of the second array.

[0017] Another embodiment provides a memory device generally including at least first and second arrays of bit line sense amplifiers to sense bit lines of memory cells of the memory device, a voltage regulator with output nodes for at least an upper voltage reference, first and second intermediate voltages, and a lower voltage reference, and sensing control circuitry. The sensing control circuitry is generally configured to precharge first and second power lines of the first array to a first precharge level, precharge first and second power lines of the first array to a second precharge level, transfer charge from the second power line of the first array to the first line of the second array, couple the second power line of the first array to the first intermediate voltage output node, and couple the first power line of the second array to the second intermediate voltage output node.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0018] The teachings of the present invention can be readily understood by considering the following detailed description in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, in which:

[0019] FIGs. 1A-1B illustrate an exemplary memory device in which embodiments of the present invention may be utilized;

[0020] FIG. 2 illustrates an exemplary sensing circuit configuration in accordance with the prior art;

[0021] FIG. 3 illustrates an exemplary timing diagram for sensing operations in accordance with the prior art;

[0022] FIG. 4 illustrates an exemplary sensing circuit configuration in accordance with embodiments of the present invention; and

[0023] FIG. 5 illustrates an exemplary timing diagram for sensing operations in accordance with embodiments of the present invention.

[0024] To facilitate understanding, identical reference numerals have been used, where possible, to designate identical elements that are common to the figures.

[0025] It is to be noted, however, that the appended drawings illustrate only exemplary embodiments of this invention and are therefore not to be considered limiting of its scope, for the invention may admit to other equally effective embodiments.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0026] Embodiments of the present invention provide methods and circuit configurations for the recycling of charge supplied to one group of bit line sense amplifiers (BLSAs) for use in sensing operations of another group of BLSAs. In general, each group of BLSAs utilizes a different pair of voltage signals to power their respective sensing operations. The first group of BLSAs may utilize an upper reference voltage and a first intermediate voltage to power its sensing operations, while the second group of BLSAs may utilize a second intermediate voltage and a lower reference voltage (e.g., GND). While the voltage differential of each pair of power lines may be greater than half the externally supplied voltage, each intermediate voltage may not. As a result, charge recycling may be accomplished over a wider range of externally supplied operating voltages.

AN EXEMPLARY CIRCUIT FOR DUAL POWER SENSING

[0027] FIG. 4 illustrates an exemplary sensing circuit 106₄ utilizing a dual power sensing scheme, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, that

may be utilized in a memory device, such as the DRAM device 100 illustrated in FIG. 1. As illustrated, the sensing circuit 106₄ generally includes a dual power voltage regulator 130₄, a switch array 132₄, and a bit line sensing controller 134₄. The bit line sensing controller 134₄ is generally configured to control the switch array 132 (via control signals 135₄), to supply voltage signals from the regulator 130₄ to BLSA arrays 140 to sense cells of memory arrays 138. As previously described, the BLSA arrays 140 may be divided into upper and lower groups 140_U and 140_L, respectively.

[0028] As illustrated, rather than supply a single intermediate voltage V_{INTM} , as with the conventional regulator 130₂ shown in FIG. 2, the regulator 130₄ may be configured to provide two intermediate output voltages, V_{INT_M1} and V_{INT_M2} for sensing operations involving the upper group 140_U and the lower group 140_L, respectively. In other words, the upper group 140_U utilizes an upper reference voltage (V_{INT}) and V_{INT_M1} to power the sensing operations, while the lower group 140_U utilizes V_{INT_M2} and a lower reference voltage (e.g. GND) to power the sensing operations. Generally, V_{INT_M2} is greater than V_{INT_M1} and is typically greater than $V_{INT}/2$, while V_{INT_M1} is typically less than $V_{INT}/2$.

[0029] However, by using such offset intermediate voltages, the differential voltage of the voltage signals used by each group to power the sensing operations of each group is greater than $V_{INT}/2$ (e.g., $V_{INT} - V_{INT_M1}$ and $V_{INT_M2} - GND$), thus allowing sensing operations over a full range of logic high and low voltage levels. Of course, the ground reference (GND) may be a true ground or a reference voltage at any other level (negative or positive) below the first intermediate voltage level providing sufficient differential voltage for sensing operations involving the lower group of BLSA arrays 140_L.

[0030] In the configuration of FIG. 4, in order to accomplish charge sharing using these dual intermediate voltage signals, the bit line sensing controller 134₄ generates additional control signals, when compared to the bit line sensing controller bit line sensing controller 134₂ of FIG. 2. For example, rather than generate a single Φ_{ACTIVE} signal, the bit line sensing controller 134₄ generates two such signals, $\Phi_{ACTIVE1}$ and $\Phi_{ACTIVE2}$. As illustrated, $\Phi_{ACTIVE1}$ controls a set of switches that couple the high voltage power line of the upper group of BLSAs 140_U (VH_BLSA1) to V_{INT} , and the low voltage

power line of the lower group of BLSAs 140_L (VL_BLSA2) to GND. As illustrated, $\Phi_{ACTIVE2}$ controls a set of switches that couple the low voltage power line of the upper group of BLSAs 140_U (VL_BLSA1) to V_{INT_M1} , and the high voltage power line of the lower group of BLSAs 140_L (VL_BLSA1) to V_{INT_M2} .

[0031] The bit line sensing controller 134₄ also generates a precharge signal Φ_{PRE_CHARGE} , which operates in a similar manner, as described above (e.g., to couple corresponding power lines of the upper and lower groups of BLSAs 140 to achieve a precharge voltage. However, as the lower voltage values have changed, the levels of the precharge voltages (VPCG1 and VPCG2), may change accordingly (e.g., VPCG1 = approx. $(V_{INT} + V_{INT_M1})/2$ and VPCG1 = approx. $(V_{INT} + V_{INT_M2})/2$). Further, an additional control signal $\Phi_{EQUALIZE}$, allows equalization of VH_BLSA2 with VL_BLSA1, in order to enable charge recycling therefrom.

[0032] Operation of the sensing circuit 106₄ may best be described with reference to FIG. 5, which illustrates an exemplary timing diagram of the control signals generated by the bit line sensing controller 134₄. As illustrated, at a time T1, prior to sensing, the power lines of each group of BLSA arrays have been precharged (e.g., by equalizing each corresponding pair of power lines via switches 222_{PC} while the bit line sensing controller 134₂ asserts Φ_{PRE_CHARGE}). As illustrated, VH_BLSA1 and VL_BLSA1 are precharged to a first level VPCG1, while VH_BLSA2 and VL_BLSA2 are precharged to VPCG2.

[0033] Sensing operations begin at a time T2, when the sensing controller 134₄ drives $\Phi_{ACTIVE1}$ high, causing switches 222_{U_H} and 222_{L_L} to close, coupling VH_BLSA1 to V_{INT} and VL_BLSA2 to GND, respectively. As a result, VH_BLSA1 increases to V_{INT} , while VL_BLSA2 decreases to GND. Note that initially the sensing controller 134₄ maintains $\Phi_{ACTIVE2}$ low. Thus, VL_BLSA1 and VH_BLSA2 are not connected to their respective intermediate voltages, V_{INT_M1} and V_{INT_M2} .

[0034] Rather, the sensing controller 134₄ asserts $\Phi_{EQUALIZE}$, coupling VL_BLSA1 and VH_BLSA2 via the equalizing switch 222_{EQ}. As illustrated, this causes charge to be transferred (recycled) from VL_BLSA1 to VH_BLSA2, as both lines equalize to a voltage level V_{INT_EQ} between V_{INT_M1} and V_{INT_M2} . At a time T3, the bit line sensing controller 134₄ de-asserts $\Phi_{EQUALIZE}$, decoupling VL_BLSA1 and VH_BLSA2, and

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asserts $\Phi_{ACTIVE2}$, coupling VL_BLSA1 and VH_BLSA2 to their respective supply voltages, V_{INT_M1} and V_{INT_M2} , via switches 222_{U_L} and 222_{L_U}. Thus, the external power supply provides the remaining charge to increase the level of VH_BLSA2 from V_{INT_EQ} to V_{INT_M2} .

[0035] At a time T4, the sensing controller 134₄ de-asserts $\Phi_{ACTIVE1}$ and $\Phi_{ACTIVE2}$, signaling an end of the sensing operations, and decoupling the power lines from the internal power supply 130₄. At a time T5, the power lines are again precharged, in preparation of the next sensing operation, for example, by asserting Φ_{PRE_CHARGE} to equalize the upper and lower group power line pairs via switches 222_{PC}.

CONCLUSION

[0036] The present invention provides sensing control circuits that utilize a power supply with dual intermediate voltage levels to achieve adequate voltage differential for each group of BLSA arrays, while still allowing charge recycling. By utilizing overlapping power supplies, as described herein, charge recycling may be performed over a wider range of operating voltages, possibly extending the life of current device technologies as external supply voltages continue to fall.

[0037] While the foregoing is directed to the illustrative embodiment of the present invention, other and further embodiments of the invention may be devised without departing from the basic scope thereof, and the scope thereof is determined by the claims that follow.